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SUBJECT: AUGUST VOLUNTARY VISITOR PROGRAM (HO CHI MINH CITY SENIOR
EDITORS) PRODUCES PRO-USG COVERAGE IN AN UNLIKELY PLACE

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Eight senior editors from Ho Chi Minh City newspapers, along with a senior official from the Ho Chi Minh City Journalists Association, recently returned from a highly successful, albeit rare, opportunity to participate in a USG exchange program. As Vietnam's largest media center and most populous city, Ho Chi Minh City plays a key role in the political and economic development of the country, and it would appear logical that HCMC-based journalists would be well placed to qualify for international training and exchange visits. Nonetheless, bringing this program to fruition was quite difficult due to ongoing attempts by GVN officials to discourage media participation in International Visitor or other USG exchange programs. Considerable effort aimed at building relationships with media resulted in a breakthrough last summer when the HCMC Journalists Association proposed a US trip that was approved by the central and local governments. The impact of this project is now evident in a series of articles just published by the Ministry of Public Security newspaper "Cong An" ("Security"). The articles, written by an MPS participant in the VOLVIS program, are helping to introduce U.S. society, media, and politics to a popular audience of over one-quarter million readers. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Nine senior editors from HCMC media outlets were chosen for this program, an initiative of the HCMC Journalists Association. The purpose of the VOLVIS was to learn about media standards and the scope and role of media institutions in the United States; to gain insights into American social, economic and political structures; to discuss problems and issues of common professional concern with American journalist colleagues; and to gain first-hand knowledge of U.S. society, educational organizations, and government. The group spent eleven days visiting newspaper editors, press organizations, and other offices in Washington, New York, and San Francisco in order to learn about technical and management aspects of the media business. The program focused on newsroom management, problems and issues that journalists face, marketing and advertising, and the role of journalism in civil society.

¶3. (U) Washington D.C.: The editors group met with Gene Mater, International Program Manager, Freedom Forum, to learn about the role and activities of Freedom Forum. They also visited the Washington Post, where they engaged in a dialogue about newsroom operations and problems of the print press in the Internet age. The group attended a State Department Press Briefing, visited the Foreign Press Center, and met with representatives of the National Press Club and International Center for Journalists. They had an opportunity to engage members of the American

Society of Newspaper Editors in a discussion of training and speaker opportunities.

¶4. (U) New York City: The three-day program in NYC included meetings with counterparts at the Wall Street Journal and New York Times to discuss management and professional issues, as well as visits to the Associated Press; the Newspaper of Association of America (NAA); and the New York Stock exchange.

¶5. (U) San Francisco: While in HCMC's Sister City, the team held meetings with professors at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism; editors at the Oakland Tribune; George Saxton, President of the San Francisco-Ho Chi Minh City Sister City Committee; and officers of the Oakland Police Department.

¶6. (SBU) Justification/objective: Ho Chi Minh City editors approached post with a proposal to go the U.S. to see first-hand how American media outlets operate in the Internet age. They sought to better understand what U.S. editors are concerned about today, and how they manage their outlets and marketing issues. Post was eager to respond to this request, especially given how difficult it has been to include Vietnamese media in our usual exchange programs. (Officials generally do not approve high-level participation by journalists in USG programs.) According to the editors, insights gained from their trip will help them improve their paper's newsroom operations, and introduce ways of dealing with possible challenges. Importantly, the trip was a great opportunity for senior editors to learn about the much-vaunted independence of US newspapers--which Vietnamese newspapers reportedly aspire to achieve.

¶7. (U) Result/impact: Excellent. Members of the group were extremely impressed with the scope and usefulness of the program. They appreciated the many briefings they received from media outlets, the UC journalism school, and USG institutions. Although the program was of short duration, the team gained a good understanding of press freedom in the United States, as well as issues facing the news industry. In addition, they

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developed an enthusiastic appreciation for how American newspapers operate and manage their newsrooms; the multiplicity of issues with which American newspapers must cope; and how American journalists are protected by civic norms and court precedent. According to team leader Nguyen van Phung, the Voluntary Visitor program helped the team appreciate the role American news media plays in society. The team had an especially useful meeting with the American Society of Newspaper Editors during which both sides discussed future opportunities for cooperation. According to the team, they quickly came to realize how many professional interests and concerns they have in common with U.S. counterparts.

¶8. (U) During the HCMC Senior Editors' debriefing, members of the team were generally very positive about the trip but also suggested that they would like to have had fewer meetings in order to spend more time with a few senior editors from US newspapers in order to discuss professional issues in a more focused and in-depth way.

¶9. (U) The SGGP group thanked Nalinee Cain, Bill Whelan, and Emma Madison for organizing an outstanding program. The team also thanks their interpreters Hai Chu, Le Thu Phan, and escort Joan Gibbons for all of their helps and support.

¶10. (U) Following are the participants of the VOLVIS program:

Mr. DANG Tam Chanh Vice Editor-in-Chief, Saigon Tiep Thi (Saigon Marketing newspaper);

Mr. DANG Xuan Dung Editor-in-Chief, Cong An (police newspaper)
Note: This is the media outlet of the Ministry of Public Security, which often tries to stop just this kind of exchange from taking place. Yet, this participant has himself printed

very positive coverage of the trip, including praise for the VolVis program;

Ms. THI DO THI MY, Editor-in-Chief, Khan Quang Do (children's newspaper);

Mr. DOAN MINH PHONG, Deputy Editor-in-Chief, Phu Nu (women's newspaper);

Mr. DOAN KHAC XUYEN; Managing Editor, Saigon Economic Times (weekly magazine);

Mr. MAI NGOC PHUOC Deputy Editor-in-Chief, Phap Luat (law newspaper);

Mr. NGUYEN VAN PHUNG, Permanent Vice President, Ho Chi Minh City Journalists' Association;

Ms. THAI PHONG SUONG, Editor-in-Chief, Ho Chi Minh City's The Thao (sports daily);

Mr. VO HONG SON, Vice Editor-in-Chief, Saigon Giai Phong newspaper (Saigon Liberation Daily).

¶11. (SBU) Comment: Through this rare VolVis opportunity, prominent and influential editors were exposed to critical values and aspects of U.S. media. These experiences have already begun to translate into articles in their various outlets, which reach a broad Vietnamese readership. The papers publicizing the VOLVIS have even included, unexpectedly, the official "police" organ in HCMC. PAS will continue to aggressively seek opportunities for further exchange with Vietnamese media.

¶12. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
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